

Hepatitis A (infectious hepatitis)

Disease Fact Sheet Series

What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A (formerly known as infectious hepatitis) is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis A virus. The disease is fairly common; approximately one hundred cases are reported each year in Wisconsin.

Who gets hepatitis A?

Anyone can get hepatitis A, but it occurs most frequently in children.

How is the virus spread?

The hepatitis A virus enters through the mouth, multiplies in the body, and is passed in the stool, which becomes highly infectious. If careful hand washing with soap is not done, the virus can then be carried on an infected person's hands. From there, the virus can be spread to others by direct contact, or by consuming food or drink that has been handled by that infected individual. In some cases, it can be spread by consuming water contaminated with improperly treated sewage. Because the virus is passed in the stool, children with hepatitis A who are not toilet trained can be an important source of the infection. The hepatitis A virus is not normally spread to casual classroom contacts or work associates.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis A?

The symptoms of hepatitis A may include profound fatigue, poor appetite, fever and vomiting. Urine may become darker in color, and jaundice (a yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes) may appear. The disease is rarely fatal and most people recover without any complications after several weeks. Infants and young children tend to have very mild or no symptoms, and are much less likely to develop jaundice than are older children and adults. Persons, who have pre-existing liver problems can become extremely ill if they contract hepatitis A especially those who have hepatitis C.

How soon do symptoms appear?

The symptoms may appear two to seven weeks after exposure, but usually occur about four weeks after exposure.

For how long is an infected person able to spread the virus?

The contagious period begins about two weeks before the symptoms appear, and continues for about one week after onset of jaundice.

Does past infection with hepatitis A make a person immune?

Once an individual recovers from hepatitis A, he or she is immune for life and does not continue to carry the virus.

What is the treatment for hepatitis A?

There are no special medicines or antibiotics that can be used to cure hepatitis A once the symptoms appear. Generally, bed rest is all that is needed.

How can hepatitis A be prevented?

The single most effective way to prevent the spread of the hepatitis A virus is careful hand washing after using the toilet, after diapering children, and prior to handling food. The routine use of good hygiene is important because a person with hepatitis A can be infectious to others for about two weeks before they even know they are sick. In addition, infected people should not handle foods during the contagious period.

For persons who have already been exposed to hepatitis A, an injection of immune globulin will minimize the chances of becoming ill, if it is administered within 14 days of exposure. Household members, day care contacts, or others in close contact with an infected person should promptly call a doctor or their local health department about the advisability of obtaining a shot of immune globulin. In typical workplace and classroom situations, contacts do not need to receive immune globulin.

A vaccine to prevent hepatitis A is available, but should be given at least four weeks before potential exposure takes place. Therefore, its use is currently limited to persons whose activities are likely to put them at risk of exposure to the hepatitis A virus in the future, such as travelers to countries where the infection is prevalent (see the CDC website for detailed travelers' health information <http://www.cdc.gov/travel/index.htm>).

Other groups for whom the vaccine is recommended or may be beneficial include:

- Persons with chronic liver disease (including those who have hepatitis C)
- Persons who have blood clotting-factor disorders
- Sexually active men who have sex with men
- Persons who work or reside in institutions for the developmentally challenged
- Users of illegal drugs
- Persons living in communities which have very high levels of hepatitis A and which are subject to periodic community-wide epidemics of the disease.

Vaccination consists of two injections, given six to twelve months apart. The initial dose will provide immunity to hepatitis A beginning in about four weeks and lasting about one year. The second dose provides long-term immunity that lasts for years and perhaps lifelong.